



Alcimedès

Approximately 5320 years ago, in a region of the Ötztal Alps that straddles the border between Italy and Austria, a 45 year old man died. His death probably went largely un-noticed until 1991, when his brilliantly-preserved, mummified body was spotted by two German walkers out for a stroll.¹ “Ötzi the Iceman” had only decided to resurface after several millennia because the summer months had been particularly warm to his blanket of ice, meaning that his cover was eventually blown. This time, he achieved instant worldwide celebrity by simply having been disturbed after a prolonged lie-in.

His discovery caused an obvious celebration from scientists who were presumably thrilled at the prospect of working with such a well-maintained specimen. However, his reappearance also caused much debate as to how he had died, who had actually found him, the timing and content of his last meal, and who the rightful “owners” should be. Radio-isotope dating suggested that he had died approximately 5300 years previously, with early speculation that he had died from hypothermia. A subsequent CT scan also demonstrated a flint arrow embedded in his left shoulder with also evidence of a head injury: the cause of his death is therefore still not generally agreed. Examination of his intestinal contents demonstrated that he ate twice in the few hours pre-mortem, with his meals consisting of grain and meat.²

Surveys of the border land in which he was found confirmed that he had been lying on Italian soil by approximately 100 m. He is currently a valued resident of the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy where he has enjoyed his retirement since 1998 and where the 19th September 2011 marked the 20th anniversary of his rebirth. He apparently kept a dignified silence at his party.

In September 2011, officials in Texas announced that the privilege of a “last meal” request would be abolished for death-row prisoners. This followed concerns that the request was not appropriate for convicted murderers, especially following a recent case where a white supremacist ordered a huge slap-up meal and then said he was not hungry.³ Alcimedès understands that the bewitchingly nutritious “Beans and wedges” was not on his menu.

The 9th World Day Against the Death Penalty occurred on the 10th October 2011. This international event was recognised by the United Nations for its first time, with Amnesty International producing data outlining execution statistics from around the World. Figures for 2010 suggest that 67 countries issued the death sentence, (although only 58 countries claim to be retentionist) with 23 countries carrying out executions.⁴ Current techniques include beheading, electrocution, hanging, lethal injection and shooting.

China is widely believed to carry out more state executions than any other country, and probably more than all other countries combined. However, official figures are not known as they are considered to be state secrets.

In December 2012, the United Nations General Assembly is scheduled to vote on a worldwide moratorium on the abolition of the death penalty.

The American DNA Database “Codis” (*Combined DNA Index System*) is said to be the largest such database in the world with over 10 million profiles currently stored. It has recently met with controversy as to the number of DNA loci that should be measured when profiling a sample. It currently uses a 13 loci system, but this is set to increase to 24 following recommendations from an FBI working group.⁵ (*The UK’s DNA Database (NDNAD) was established in 1995 and uses a 10 loci system.*)

This decision has met with dismay from many members of the US forensic community who feel that they were not consulted as to which loci should be measured, as some loci are more discriminatory than others.

A UK medical ethics charity has raised an interesting slant to the issue of tissue and organ donation. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, which was established in 1991 and which is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust, has suggested that the individuals who leave their bodies to medical science should have their funeral arrangements funded. In their recent report “Human Bodies: Donation for Medicine and Research” the Council also advocates a payment system for organ donation to cover such areas as discomfort, inconvenience and loss of earnings.⁶

Ethical issues surrounding tissue donation are renowned for their complexity: whether monetary considerations would simplify matters or merely complicate and corrupt this area remains to be seen.

The latest figures from the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse have demonstrated a reduction in the number of heroin and crack addicts in England, an increase in the number completing a withdrawal programme, and a reduced waiting time for addicts to enter treatment. 52,933 addicts came forward for treatment in 2010–11 which represented a drop of approximately 10,000 compared with two years ago. Additionally, 96% of individuals waited less than three weeks to start treatment and over 27,000 people left the treatment programmes drug-free: this was 150% more than five years previously.⁷

Critics of such figures will argue that not all addicts seek treatment and there is therefore a degree of uncertainty with interpreting statistics when dealing with drug addiction.

References

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